





Fig. 1
18th-century *Bambino*,
probably Italian, within a
Neapolitan 18th-century silver
niche. The interior is lined
with red silk, embroidered
gold, and has a reliquary at the
back. This *Bambino* was once
part of the collection of
Sir Agostino Naudi
(Private Collection, Malta /
Photo: Peter Bartolo Parnis)

The Christmas *Bambini* Tradition in Malta

Simon Mercieca and Joseph Muscat discuss this delightful
custom that has taken root in Malta

Using a 'baby doll' to represent the infant Jesus during Mass at Christmas, is a recent happening in the same manner as celebrating Mass at Midnight is in certain parishes. Even the representation of the sculptured image of Jesus as a baby should be linked to the early modern period. Using a sculptured representation of a baby, a virtually nude infant boy lying on a little straw or exhibited in a more solemn fashion, inside an exposition throne, became part of tradition for Franciscan Friars in the Catholic Latin world when, during Christmas, they began to decorate their churches with an image of infant Jesus.

It is a known fact that it was the Franciscans who spread the tradition of the infant in churches throughout Italy especially during Christmas time. There can be no doubt that the Franciscan Minors brought with them this tradition to Malta. They first introduced it in their own churches or chapels and gradually the practice spread throughout the island. Originally, the infant was used in a liturgical context. The preferred image was that of the *Bambino* that used to

Simon Mercieca is a French-trained historian who specializes in demographic and behavioural history. He is a senior lecturer at the Department of History within the Faculty of Arts at the University of Malta, and coordinator of the Contemporary Mediterranean Studies Course at the same faculty.

Joseph Muscat is a maritime historian. He has carried out research on Maltese ships and boats, ex-voto paintings, ship graffiti as well as the navy of the Order of St John.



left: Fig. 2
The Aracœli *Bambino*

opposite top: Fig. 3
Baby Jesus of Spanish origin at the
Discalced Carmelite Convent in Cospicua

opposite bottom: Fig. 4
A 17th-century *trajbu bambino* belonging
to the Franciscan Minors in Rabat

be found at the Aracœli Basilica in Rome of which various lithographical images were produced over the centuries, some of which even found their way to Malta and were a source of inspiration to artists here (Fig. 2).

But it would be wrong to assume that the Franciscans were alone in the diffusion of this culture in southern Europe. New studies reveal that there were two other religious Orders, both linked to the Counter-Reformation that pushed this new devotion in Catholic Europe. The first one was the newly founded Order of the Discalced Carmelites.¹ The founder of this Order, the female mystic Therese of Ávila, encouraged her brethren to keep an image of baby Jesus in their convent cells and take it with them whenever they travelled. The Jesuits too propagated devotion for the image of baby Jesus, which would eventually condition the manner of how Europe would begin to evaluate babies and childhood. The seeds sown in those far off centuries are now conditioning the importance that our society is giving towards the protection of children.

In the second half of the sixteenth century, the emphasis was on showing baby Jesus as an adult person, and thus, he was represented with the full anatomy of a male adult. He

was presented in a standing position, blessing the viewers with his right hand. This position was known as that of the '*Bambino Benedicente*'. Two early examples of this type of '*bambino*' in Malta can still be enjoyed. The first one is the big stone statue in the chancellery of the Jesuits' Church in Valletta, in itself a vivid manifestation of the importance that this Order began to give to the representation of the birth of Jesus. The second is an old wooden statue, one of the oldest representations of baby Jesus in Malta. It is of Spanish origin and is to be found at the Discalced Carmelite Convent of Cospicua (Fig. 3). Baby Jesus is also represented in a standing position. He follows the baroque tradition of the time, being presented dressed up; his attire also includes a wig, which explains the importance that was given at this period to the association of childhood with adolescence.

The Aracœli *Bambino* in a 'dolled' position was the inspiration behind the posture of the Franciscan *bambino*. Baby Jesus was also represented as a clothed infant resting on a lace pillow without any visible hands or feet. Often the infant had no torso, for its makeshift body was tube-shaped made from cloth, known in Maltese as *trajbu*. This tube would be stuffed either with straw or cloth in order to give it firmness. Sometimes this puppet was bedecked in fine cloth but it cannot be excluded that some were adorned with somewhat poorer fabric, each according to the means available. However, all looked alike, as all that was visible was the face. The face was moulded in wax, which was a cheaper material than having the face made out of wood. Eventually, when papier-mâché or plaster was introduced in the eighteenth century, the latter materials would be preferred for this type of representation. Hence, this infant in Malta may be considered to be a poorer imitation. One of the earliest surviving models dates back to the seventeenth century and can be found at the Franciscan Minors' in Rabat (Fig. 4). This type of model began to be used during services celebrating the feast of the Epiphany, which falls on the 6th January, when the Church celebrates the Three Kings' visit to the manger to pay homage

to the Messiah. In the past, the image of the infant Jesus was solemnly exposed on this day on the main altar for the faithful to pay homage.

One has to remember that until the reform of the solar calendar, Christmas day was set to fall on the 6th January. In fact Orthodox Catholics, who carried on following the old calendar (and did not adopt the Gregorian one adhering to what is known as the Julian calendar), still celebrate Christmas on the 6th January, which is the day the western Church today celebrates the Epiphany. Throughout early modern times, various parishes in Malta continued with the past tradition and celebrated Christmas more on the 6th January, rather than the 25th December. It was thanks to the Mendicant Orders, as the Franciscans are known, and supported from the nineteenth century by the British Colonial influence that Christmas began to be celebrated principally on the 25th December. In some parishes, there was no midnight Mass until recently.

The Aracoeli devotion coupled with the theological teaching on the birth of Jesus, was pushed forward by Jesuit scholars, in particular G.A. Patrignani, whose books had great success in Malta during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and produced a devotion to the image of baby Jesus in various parishes.² In almost all the parishes, a painted



or sculptured image of Jesus, either of wood or papier-mâché began to be fixed in the altar's shelf (mensole) and foundations were set up. In Cospicua and Senglea, this type of foundation was known as '*del Santissimo Bambino*'. Sometimes, these foundations were administered by a lay procurator.³ At Cospicua, Senglea and Kirkop, for example, this statuette was kept on the altar dedicated to St Joseph. At Żurriq and Mqabba, it was associated with an altar dedicated to the Virgin Mary. In a deed signed before Notary Domenico





Fig. 5
Baby Jesus by Mariano Gerada belonging to the
Discalced Carmelites in Cospicua

Camilleri on the 30th December 1677 the Żurrieq foundation was set up by Valerio Magro, to look after the solemn celebration of the feast of the Epiphany, while a small statue of baby Jesus was placed on the altar 'shelf' of St Roque, but which was dedicated to Our Lady of Grace.⁴ The Mqabba one was associated with the altar of the Immaculate Conception. Such a cult was a great source of devotion as the procurator of the Cospicua foundation, for example, left an account of the capital investments made in bonds or so-called *censi bullari* to provide funds for the embellishment of the church with candles during services as well as paying for the oil to illuminate the church and for the Christmas Novena and the High Mass on Christmas Day. At Mqabba, the image of baby Jesus had to be protected by crystal glass due to the amount of gold and silver offerings donated by the faithful.⁵

Francesco Zahra attested to the importance that the iconographic standing the liturgical infant of Aracœli began to have in eighteenth-century Malta. This image inspired him for his representation of the birth of the Virgin Mary,

which he created for Cospicua Collegiate Parish Church of the Immaculate Conception. Zahra depicted the Holy Fathers of the Church paying homage to Mary's Immaculate Conception. However, he presented the figure of the Madonna as a child on a lace pillow. Thus, when he painted his picture for the Collegiate Church choir stalls he must have had in mind one of the many lithographs of this Aracœli *Bambino* and adopted this male model to represent the birth of an infant female. It has to be said here that for Christian iconography this was an innovative way to represent the birth of the Madonna. One does not find many such examples where the birth of the Madonna is depicted in the Aracœli paradigm. One has to remember that the iconographic representation of the birth of the Madonna from the earliest days of the Church, both in the East and West, depicted baby Mary being handled by the midwife and preparing her for the first bath. Mary's mother, St Anne was shown resting in bed after labour. Facing this painting, Zahra painted another birth scene, this time even more transgressive but equally innovative; St Anne was shown at the moment of giving birth to Mary.

With the arrival of the British in Malta, at the turn of the nineteenth century, the cult of baby Jesus got a further boost. Perhaps this can be related to two factors: Protestants and Anglicans had, by this time, a different concept of Christmas to that of Catholics, as they were stuck in the medieval theology about the infancy of Jesus. In terms of celebration, they abhorred the use of sculptures and other images of Jesus. These were deemed as pagan representations and were thought to demean the regal stature of the mystery of the incarnation. Perhaps, in Malta, the paradoxical climax of this theological clash is represented by the theological confrontation between Dun Ġorg Preca and the Protestant and political right-wing political agitator Manuel Dimech. The latter represented Protestant theology, with which he had been influenced while in prison by visiting Protestants, in particular Methodist pastors. In his newspaper Dimech

Fig. 6
Baby Jesus by Xandru Farrugia for the parish
of Żejtun

attacked the increased diffusion of images of baby Jesus that was taking place, affirming that they demean the dignity of God. Preca answered by further popularizing such practices and introduced a procession in which an image of baby Jesus was carried on Christmas Eve by the members of his newly created society known as the M.U.S.E.U.M. for the teaching of the Christian doctrine.⁶

In the nineteenth century, Catholics in Malta sought to emphasize this regal and Godly image by having baby Jesus represented with a cross or a globe in his left hand while blessing the viewers with the other. Baby Jesus with a cross and a globe was popularly known as the Redeemer. In the case that his physical gestures conveyed only an idea of blessing, it was referred to as the '*Salvatore Mundi bambino*'. This iconographic expression followed the one of the famous Bambino of Prague whose image was popularised by the Discalced Carmelites.⁷

Moreover, artists began to present baby Jesus as a toddler, at the age when a child can stand freely on his two feet and hold something in his hands. This is how Mariano Gerada presented his baby Jesus in a sculptured image, which he executed for the Discalced Carmelites of Cospicua (Fig. 5). The toddler Jesus has a Cross in his hands. Żejtun asked Gerada's student, Xandru Farrugia, who incidentally hailed from Żejtun, to carve two wooden statuettes for them, one to be permanently exhibited in the altar shelf of Our Lady of the Rosary, and the other to be used during the Christmas celebrations. In the first one, he followed the older custom of a lying figure of baby Jesus with a cross in his hands. In the second, he trailed in Gerada's footsteps, but instead of representing Jesus holding a cross, he sculptured him standing holding a small globe in his hands (Fig. 6). Other parishes began to replace their older versions with this new model. Żurrieq had a new statue made out of wax, the infant blessing the faithful with one hand while holding a globe in the other. Attard parish and the Dominican priory of Rabat too acquired a similar '*bambino*' each. The Attard statue is a rare

work of high quality by Maltese craftsman made from clay.

The importance that the images of baby Jesus assumed in this period can be further asserted from the practice of reusing old images and sculptures of Jesus that used to adorn processional statues during Christmas festivities. When in 1826, the old statue of Our Lady of the Rosary by Pietro Felice at Cospicua parish church was replaced by a new one by Pietro Paolo Azzopardi,⁸ Azzopardi requested that as part of his fee for the new statue, he would have the right to keep the baby Jesus of the old statue while the Confraternity would keep the rest of the effigy. The same situation repeated itself when Cospicua sold off its old statue of St Joseph to Marsaxlokk after replacing it with a new one made by Abraham Gatt. At Marsaxlokk, the old statue was dismembered, and the image of baby Jesus, which was in St Joseph's hand, began to be used for the Christmas Eve procession by the Society of Christian Doctrine. Unfortunately, all traces of this effigy are now lost.⁹

During the second half of the nineteenth century, images of baby Jesus made from papier-mâché became more



popular and in demand for veneration in our churches. One of the oldest surviving infants made from this medium is to be found in Cospicua at the Church of St Paul (Fig. 8). It must be said that it is one of the most beautiful to be found in Malta. According to oral tradition, this was the work of Carlo Darmanin (1825-1909) and the high quality of the workmanship makes this very likely.

Clearly, the artist who created this infant was acquainted with older traditions associated with the birth of Christ especially those of the previous century since he paid particular attention to the posture of the infant. Overall, eighteenth-century infants had baroque putti faces and their expressions were dramatically theatrical. This infant did not escape the romantic and liturgical influence of the new century. The representation is now more rigid, dispersing with the baroque theatricality present in the works of both Gerada

and Azzopardi. Darmanin instead prefers to present Jesus in a natural sleeping position, while his facial expression is more serious than the jovial air in Gerada's figures. It expresses signs of boredom or sadness as though, the baby Jesus, is aware of the cruel destiny awaiting him. This expression is hardly apparent in infants prior to the Romantic era. For example, if one looks at the hair, one will note that there is a parting synonymous with a nineteenth-century style. Even the form of his chin belongs to the nineteenth-century Romantic era. The eyes are of glass, which came into use in the seventeenth century and were considered something very precious. During the eighteenth century this custom expanded and we also find some being used in Malta. This practice became popular in the nineteenth century. Also the colour that the artist used for the infant reflected this new trend. Today that skin colour has turned grey. No doubt this colour, virtually of a lifeless infant

below: Fig. 7
Clay *bambino* by Wistin Camilleri

opposite: Fig. 8
Papier-mâché *bambino* by Carlo Darmanin found at the Church of St Paul in Cospicua





or a newborn child faded as the paint became discoloured with time. However, it should be noted that the artist did not use strong colours on this infant. Indeed, one suspects that he used colours to attract the faithful in order to associate this infant with death. As already explained the infant is realistic but at the same time lacks that dramatic liveliness; it is virtually a caricature of infants produced in the previous century. The cult of Good Friday and Easter began to take hold during this period and people's overall psyche reached a point of accepting the mystery thus paving the way for the Resurrection.

There are other '*bambini*' attributed to Carlo Darmanin. Senglea too has a long-standing tradition that its bambino is by Darmanin, but the ones at Mosta and Qrendi give rise to serious doubts about their creation.¹⁰ It would be more appropriate to attribute the latter two statues to one of Darmanin's students, Giuseppe Cilia. The facial expression of the Mosta bambino, for example, is very similar to that belonging to Paola's Parish Church or the bambino in the hands of the statue of Our Lady of Sacred Heart in Sliema, both works by Cilia.

Besides Cilia, who was very active at the turn of the twentieth century, one finds other artists creating papier-mâché statues of baby Jesus. Abraham Gatt (1863-1944) modelled one for Cospicua parish church. He continued in the romantic tradition and presented the baby in a dormant position aimed at stimulating devotion. Gatt tried to be as precise as possible to the anatomy of a human figure, which is symptomatic of Gatt's style per se. He also presented a chubby little fellow associated with the late Romantic representation of children.

Another recent acquisition by the Cospicua Collegiate Church was a baby Jesus by Giuseppe Caruana (1887-1973) known as *il-Marġol*. Like Abraham Gatt, *il-Marġol* was an artist who hailed from Cospicua.¹¹ The figure was never intended for a place of worship, but only for home decoration during Christmas. This infant has merits since it is the workmanship of another twentieth-century papier-mâché artist. It is not as polished a work as one would wish, but it does have value if taken within the context of the times. The puppet was created at a time in Europe when toys began to be manufactured on an industrial scale and were no longer dependent on the workmanship of artisans. These industrially produced toys began being introduced into Malta and included large dolls from Lecce. Caruana seems to have used one of his large moulds, which he used to model big processional statues, in order to create the face and head of baby Jesus. This would explain how he managed to achieve the effect of large dolls, which were in circulation at the time. The head is somewhat out of proportion to the size of the infant's body. Its hair, particularly his curls remind one of the dolls with which mothers and grandmothers in their heydays played with.

The most important point in this infant is the colour of his skin. Skin colour is very difficult to recreate but Caruana was a master of the art of paint and attempted to copy the complexion that dolls had at the time. These dolls, like the Lecce baby Jesus, belonged solely to those who were well off. Those who could not afford Lecce prices turned to local artists who were cheaper.

But Lecce did not only sell dolls to Malta. In the twentieth century it began to export processional statues as



Fig. 9
Lecce *bambino* at the Cospicua parish church, formerly
belonging to the machine shop at the Malta Drydocks

well as '*bambini*'. Two good examples of these babies are to be found one at the Cospicua parish church and at the centre of Christian Doctrine (M.U.S.E.U.M.) at Rabat. The one at Cospicua originally belonged to the machine shop section of the Drydocks (Fig. 9). It was donated to this church when the Drydocks closed down. Former employees recalled that this image of baby Jesus was brought to Malta around 1950. It is possible that it was bought on the initiative of a member of the M.U.S.E.U.M. movement of whom many worked at the Drydocks at the time. The '*bambino*' at Rabat is older. It dates back to the 1930s. At the time the demand began to grow for aesthetically beautiful '*bambini*' of good quality but at a more affordable price.

Wistin Camilleri would take up the challenge. He cast a mould of the Lecce baby of Rabat and began to mass-produce papier-mâché babies in a rather big size. He also produced cheaper statues made out of Maltese clay or gypsum but always modelled on the much demanded Lecce statues, thus helping the objective of the Christian Doctrine Society to place an image of baby Jesus in every home in Malta and Gozo.

Notes

- 1 Jacques Le Brun, 'La devozione al Bambin Gesù nel secolo XVII', E. Becchi and D. Julia (eds), *Storia dell'Infanzia Dall'Antichità al Seicento* (Editori Laterza, 1996), Vol.1, 312-368.
- 2 Giuseppe Antonio Patrignani, *La Santa Infanzia del Figliuolo di Dio* (Venice, 1746); *Finezze Amoroze del Santo Bambino Gesù*, Nuova edizione riveduta e ricorretta (Roma, 1896).
- 3 For example, a Foundation was set up in Cospicua to spread the devotion towards baby Jesus. Parts of their records are to be found in the volume marked, *Conti Vol. 15 1743-1760-1772, Burmula Bambino 1751-1754*.
- 4 I would like to thank Anthony Mangion for this information.
- 5 Simon Mercieca, 'L-Artal u l-Konfraternità tal-Immakulata Kunċizzjoni ġewwa l-Imqabba, L-ewwel tliet mitt sena ta' storja', Charles J. Farrugia (ed.), *Sicut Lilium, Devozzjoni u Ritwal tul is-Sekli* (Malta: Soċjetà Mużikali Madonna tal-Gilju, Mqabba, 2012), 166.
- 6 Gerald Azzopardi, *Manwel Dimech u Dun Ġorg Preca* (Malta: Kunitat Monument Manwel Dimech, 1981).
- 7 *Li Mkaddes Bambin Miraculus ta Praga, storia Fattijiet u Talb mictub bil Malti minn Patri Teresia* (Malta: Maistre, 1910).
- 8 Cospicua Parish Archive, *Libro Esito Della Veneranda Confraternita' del Santissimo Rosario eretta nella S. Insigne Collegiata e Parrocchiale Chiesa della Citta' Cospicua*, 127. On the 21st April 1828, Notary Calcedonio Battagille recorded part of the payment made to Azzopardi for his work. The deed specified that '*il pagamento di scudi cento venti cinque fatto allo sculture P. Paolo Azzopardi cioè in quanto a scudi cinquanta valore del Bambino dell'antica statua e gli restante scudi settanta cinque in moneta contante. E sono detti scudi venticinque a conto delli li 225 scudi prezzo sia manifattura della nuova statua che sta facendo.*'
- 9 Information about this statue was given to me by the late sexton of Marsaxlokk parish church, Ċikku Gatt.
- 10 Stanley Mangion and Christopher Magro, *Karlu Darmanin, Il-Princep tal-Istatwarji, Hajtu u Hidmietu* (Print Right Limited, 2010), 116.
- 11 This infant was in a private house and was intended to decorate and generate Christmas spirit. It was donated to the Cospicua parish church by Dun Guzepp Zammit.

Treasures from the National Library

Maroma Camilleri

Hieronymus Natalis, *Evangelicae Historiae Imagines* (Antwerp, 1593)

The author of this rare work, Jerónimo Nadal (1507-1580), was a Spanish Jesuit from the first generation of companions of St Ignatius of Loyola. After having completed his studies at the University of Alcalá de Henares and the University of Paris, he was ordained priest in 1538. He joined the Society of Jesus seven years later. It was Ignatius himself who urged Nadal to design an illustrated guide for prayerful meditation on the Gospels, based on the Spiritual Exercises. Nadal undertook the work which, however, he left incomplete at his death.

The work consists of a series of 153 folio-size engravings which show, in chronological order, the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. Nadal selected the biblical scenes to be included, and commissioned and directed the layout of the illustrations. The texts for each scene were composed between 1568 and 1576. The engravings were made by Anton, Hieronymus and Jan Wiericx as well as by Charles Mallery and Jan Collaert, after designs by Marten de Vos. The work was printed in Antwerp by Martinus Nutius and published in 1593. In 1594 and 1595 it was again published in larger volumes, entitled *Adnotationes*



et Meditationes in Evangelia with more images executed by Bernardino Passeri and Giovanni Battista Fiammeri. Apart from its significance as a spiritual work, the *Evangelicae Historiae Imagines* became a monument of Flemish printing in the sixteenth century.

The National Library of Malta owns a copy of the 1593 edition, bound in plain, coloured alum-tawed skin. The cover boards are held closed by copper clasps. The provenance of the book is unknown.